



"23" AND OTHER NUMERICAL EXPRESSIONS.

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WHEN I returned to America in June 1906 after a two years' absence, the first new expression I heard of those that had grown up in the meantime was "23" with its alternate "skiddoo." The alternative power of the two expressions has become so great that sometimes, in counting, the one is used for the other, thus: "twenty-one, twenty-two, skiddoo, twenty-four," etc. The New York Telephone Co. even published in 1906 a pamphlet with the mysterious title "23." And Mr. Dooley fancies that foreign aspirations will find a "23" painted on the door of America.

My philological mind asked at once for an explanation of this very strange linguistic phenomenon. It seems most probable that "skiddoo" is an abbreviation of "skedaddle," and the latter is said to be college slang made up from the Greek *σκεδάσσειν*. So this word did not trouble me very long. But how to take hold of the slippery "23"? I heard over half a dozen explanations for this expression, out of which I think only five to be worth mentioning.

1. I was told on the race-grounds only twenty-two horses were admitted, and that, when the race-horses were counted, the twenty-third, of course, was "skiddoo."

2. A man who had lived in the West for a number of years said that in California the "23" had had its ominous meaning for several years, and that the term had only migrated eastward in 1905, like other products of western civilization. In California, he said, there used to be vigilance committees composed of 23 members, and whenever in one of the border-towns, a man had made himself unpleasant and was to be invited to leave the place, a "23" was painted on his door; then he knew that the "23" were after him and that it was advisable for him to skip quietly.

3. The number "23" was said to be a signal of the base-ball players meaning "get off the grounds." However, I do not see why

a plain statement like this should be veiled in mystery, since the object of the proper base-ball signals concerns other matters.

4. It was called a signal of the telegraph operators, meaning "cut off the wire."

5. Again it was given to me as a police signal with a corresponding meaning.

It appears at once that in three out of the five explanations the number is taken to be a signal, and it seems to indicate that the origin of the term is indeed to be looked for among the numerical signals; Nos. 4 and 5 seem to be more likely because among telegraph operators and policemen the meaning concerned may need a signal rather than on the base-ball field.

The interesting fact connected with this expression is that a simple number without any complementary word stands for an idea usually expressed by an entirely different category of words. If all similar expressions were collected from as many languages as possible one would certainly gain a great many interesting facts not only concerning the development of human speech but also concerning the history of civilization, of manners and customs, and of the religion of mankind. Everybody has heard of the "sacred numbers," and several learned treatises have been written about them. Of these may be mentioned here: J. Hehn, *Siebenzahl und Sabbat bei den Babyloniern und im Alten Testament*, Leipsic, 1907. W. H. Roscher, "Enneadische Studien. Versuch einer Geschichte der Neunzahl bei den Griechen" (*Abhandlungen der Kgl. Sächs. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften. Phil. hist. Klasse*, 26, 1).

It is not my aim in this paper to write a scientific treatise on numerical expressions: in order to do this a vast literature would have to be consulted, and the leisure at my disposal is too limited to finish even a tenth of it. But I wish to gather here a few terms out of languages with which I have come into contact—sometimes only for a few moments—, and to show in how many different ways numbers and words derived from numbers are used in human speech. I repeat that this collection is only an accidental one, not aiming at completeness nor at systematic treatment. A great deal of it will be known to the reader. The most natural order is that of the numbers themselves.

1.—*To be one*, German "*eins sein*," is too natural to need any comments.

2.—The opposite of the preceding expression we meet in the English adverb *in two* (*in twain*), the German adverb *entzwei* and the verb (*sich*) *entzweien*.—The origin of the term *two to one* for

"pawnbroker" is also easily understood; I know it, however, only from the dictionary.—In modern Arabic we find *'ala wahade mâ-hi 'ala thintên*, "under one, not under two," scil. "conditions"; see my *Arabische Beduinenerzählungen*, I, p. 21, l. 14.

3.—"Three" as a sacred number is well known from the days of the primitive Semites, who had the trinity of heaven, earth, and sea, up to the Christian Trinity. Professor Hehn has devoted a special chapter to this number on pp. 63-75 of his book mentioned above.—Among the Gallas in southern Abyssinia *sadatshā*, "three-ness, trinity," has become the proper name of a federation of *three* tribes; see my remarks in the *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, XI, p. 392.

4.—Among the Babylonians and the Hebrews the number "four" implies the idea of the universe, originating from the four directions of the compass; compare for instance, "the four winds" and "the four quarters" of heaven in Jerem. lix. 36, also Ezek. xxxvii. 9, Dan. xi. 4. See Professor Hehn's book, p. 76.—In the same way as *sadatshā* is a combination of three, the word *afre*, "fourness, quaternity," has become the proper name of four federated Galla tribes; see the reference given above.—𐤀𐤍𐤁𐤏 "Four" is an Egyptian proper name for a person, occurring in an Aramaic papyrus; the name seems to be taken, as Professor Spiegelberg has suggested, from the four "elementary gods"; see his remarks in *Orientalische Studien* (Festschrift for Professor Nöldeke), p. 1108.

5. 6.—In the modern Arabic dialect of Syria there is a saying *dābb ikhmāsō fi stātō*, "he threw his fives into his sixes," meaning "he became utterly confused"; see my "Chant de la belle-mère en arabe moderne" in the *Journal Asiatique*, 1903, No. 9, p. 122. Professor Goldziher called my attention to the Hungarian phrase *ötölt-hotolt*, "he has fived and sixed," which signifies "he has spoken timidly, he has faltered."—A curiously similar expression is the English *at sixes and sevens*.—The Swedish word *en femma*, "a five," means "a bill of five crowns"; *se.ra*, "six," means at the same time "supper."

7.—It is impossible to treat in detail of all the superstitious uses of this number, which in all likelihood owes its sacredness to the seven planets.* I wish to mention only a few cases in which the word "seven" is used in a special meaning generally derived from a substantive or adjective which is to be supplied.

In German *die böse Sieben*, "the wicked seven," is used, as is

* Many of the ideas connected with this number are treated in an article entitled "Seven," written by Dr. Paul Carus and published in *The Open Court*, Vol. XV, pp. 335, 412. In the second instalment some ideas associated with other numbers are also touched upon. Ed.

well known, for a quarrelsome woman. The derivation is not altogether certain. It is said that in a game of cards which was in vogue some three hundred years ago and which was called "Karnöffelspiel," the seven was the card of the devil and that the *böse Sieben* took its origin from this card. The fact that seven was chosen as the number of the devil reminds us very strongly of the rôle which the seven evil spirits play in Babylonian magic.—In Tigrē, the northernmost of the modern Semitic languages of Abyssinia, *Sab'at*, "seven," is the name of the Great Bear, of course on account of its seven stars; the people speak of "the true Seven," meaning this constellation, and of "the false Seven"; the latter probably being the name of the Lesser Bear. It is known that in European nomenclature the seven stars (*Siebengestirn*) is another name for the Pleiades. Furthermore, the Tigrē people speak of "the seven short ones" and "the seven long ones" in their astrology: the former are the days during which the moon circulates from Gemini to Virgo, the latter those during which she circulates from Scorpio to Amphora. Both these periods are considered to be lucky.—In ancient Arabic *ihda min sab'*, "one of seven," means "a great, momentous or difficult thing"; there are various explanations for this expression.

8.—In Tigrē *sāmen*, "the eighth," means "week." The week consists of seven days, but since it is counted from one Sunday to another, the second Sunday is the eighth day, although properly speaking it belongs to the following week.—It may be mentioned that in some Semitic languages the days of the week are numbered, generally only the days from Sunday until Thursday—Friday and Saturday have their special names—, and that the word "day" is often omitted; then, "the one, the two, the three, the four, the five" stand for Sunday etc.

9.—This number, being three times three, is a sacred one also; about its use in Greece Professor Roscher's book mentioned above may be consulted. In Egyptian a word derived from the numeral "nine" and generally translated by "ennead" signifies a circle of nine deities.—In Northern Abyssinia the people who till the ground measure their fields according to the number of furrows, taking nine furrows as a basis. Thus they say: *kel'ōt (salas) oc' haraskō*, "I have ploughed two (or three, etc.) nines." There may be some religious reason for this custom.—Among the same people the word *tassa'a (tēsa'a)*, "has nined," is used of a month which has only twenty-nine days instead of thirty.—The German expression *alle*

neune, meaning "all and everything," is, of course, taken from the bowling-alley.

10.—In Swedish *en tia*, "a ten," means "a bill of ten crowns."—The English word *teens* should be mentioned here also.

12.—"The Twelve" is said in the New Testament of the Apostles.—The Swedish *tolfva* is the name of a game of cards.

13.—This number is mentioned here on account of the superstitions connected with it; they originate most probably from the Lord's Supper.

17. 18.—In Swedish the words *sjutton* (17) and *atton* (standing for *aderton*, 18), are used as curse words. The original expression may be something like "seventeen (eighteen) curses shall come over me (you)"; but I do not know why this number has been chosen.

23.—See above.

40.—In Northern Abyssinia *arbo'āhû*, "his forties," and *arba'āhā*, "her forties," refer to the following: A man must after his wedding remain for forty days without working, stay at home, carry a sword and the like; this time is called "his forties." A woman remains unclean for forty days after she has given birth to a boy, and these are "her forties"; compare Leviticus xii.—The Italian *quaresima*, "fasting," is of course derived from the forty fast days.—In London "the Forties" used to be the name of a famous gang of thieves.

60.—In modern Arabic there is a phrase *sittin sāne 'alêh*, "sixty years upon it," or *sittin sāne usab'in (arba'in) yôm*, "sixty years and seventy (forty) days!" which denotes contempt or expresses that the speaker does not want to be bothered with the thing at all. The number "sixty" in this phrase may be a remnant of the old sexagesimal system.—In Dutch we find a very strange slang term: *je bent wel zestig*, "you seem to be sixty," i. e., "you are crazy." Its origin is altogether unknown to me.

70.—The Latin word *Septuaginta*, "seventy," is almost used as a German word, and the same may be said of *Septuagint* in English. Generally it is used now of the first Greek translation of the Old Testament, which according to tradition was made by 70 or 72 men.—In the New Testament "the Seventy" are of course the disciples.

100.—Lately the "Black Hundred" have become notorious in Russia; compare "the Forties."

1000.—In German *Potztausend* and *Ei der Tausend* are exclamations of astonishment. *Potztausend* stands for *Gott's tausend*,

i. e., "God's thousand curses upon me (you)!" The change of *G* into *P* is caused by the wish to conceal the real word; compare *diacre*, *gad*, *gosh*, etc.—In Swedish *tusen*, "thousand," and *sjutunnertusen*, i. e., probably "seven hundred thousand," are used in swearing; the words to be supplied are probably similar to those that originally followed after *Potztausend*.